LOVE
December 24, 2007

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

O Lord, the gift of new life, new light, can be a gift truly
only if we open ourselves to receive it.
So this is our prayer, Lord:
That thou wilt open our eyes to see thy glory
in the coming again of light each day,
open our ears to hear the angels' hymn in the stirring
within us of joy at the coming of the child,
open our hearts to the transforming power of thy love
as it comes to us through the love of all those
who hold us most dear and have sacrificed most for us.
Be born among us that we may ourselves be born.
Be born within us that by words and deeds of love
we may bear tidings of thy birth to a world that dies for lack of love.
We ask it in the child's name. Amen.

Frederick Buechner
"Come and See"
Secrets in the Dark

What an amazing time of year Christmas is. We begin to prepare for it weeks, months in advance. Finally it is here. Frederick Buechner says that in some way the whole world stops this evening to listen, one more time, to an old story everyone knows so well. Church members, nonmembers, believers, nonbelievers, the faithful, the skeptics: everyone stops on Christmas Eve, and the world listens to a story.

It's an amazing time, the weeks before Christmas. It touches something deep in our hearts. It brings out the good in us, as we slow down and soften a bit and listen for the singing of angels; as we ponder simple realities—human birth, the child, children; as we become more generous and focus our attention on selecting and giving the perfect gift to our loved ones; as we open our hearts and let love in.

It touches something deeply human as we scribble notes on Christmas cards to stay in touch with dear friends—not lengthy epistles, just a beautifully human reaching out: We're well; hope you are too," "We're so grateful for our friendship; we love you." And as we dutifully struggle through those Christmas letters—two pages, single-spaced—that tell us much more than

we want to know about Adam's trumpet lessons and Stacey's volleyball team and Kimberly's orthodonture work. And as we allow the familiar carols to transport us back in time to recapture the love and the dear ones who taught us to love and give and to celebrate Christmas.

It can also be fairly demanding. It's a stressful time, the therapeutic community tells us. Stress levels are way up as we try to do everything expected of us: bake and clean and do Christmas cards and mail packages and party and entertain. The best line of the season came this year, as it always does, from a child. On the first Sunday of Advent, one of our Sunday School teachers asked her class of six-year-olds what the time before Christmas is called. A bright little girl raised her hand and said, "It's called Advil!" Well, yes, it can be that, too.

The story of the birth of Jesus has inspired some of the most sublime art and music human beings have ever created. Renaissance artists painted the annunciation, the nativity, shepherds, magi, madonna and child over and over. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, Vivaldi's *Gloria*, Handel's *Messiah* is some of the most glorious music ever composed.

There is something about the story that so captivates the human imagination that we want to recapture it, be part of it.

And so from Radio City Music Hall's seventy-five-year-old Christmas program to the humblest church children's pageant, people of all ages play their parts: angel choirs, shepherds in bathrobes, wise men, Mary, Joseph, and child.

Down in Florida, Buchanan grandchildren are moving up the casting ladder nicely. They called today to report that they are Wise Man Number 1, carrying the incense, and Angel 1 and 2. Here in Chicago, Kate and Ella were Roman Catholic angels in the choir up at St. Mathias School last Thursday night, a role they reprised here as Presbyterian angels at 4:00 p.m. today—our ecumenical angels.

These can become major productions. The *Tribune* reported today on the "Megachurches' Megashows"—elaborate stagings involving choreography by Broadway producers as well as flying angels, professional acrobats, and fireworks. Here at Fourth Presbyterian Church, we're a little more modest, but we were included in a special *USA Today* report last Friday: "Ten Great Places to Hear Heavenly Music." We're in very good company: the Mormon Tabernacle, National Cathedral, and the Wanamaker Organ in Philadelphia. So no acrobats or fireworks but some very good music.

And the season can bring out the silliest. A headline in the newspaper caught my attention before Thanksgiving. It appeared over a picture of a

very determined man holding in his arms a life-sized plastic Jesus. It read, “In Daley Plaza, Jesus Tucked In—Tightly.”

After last year, when baby Jesus was stolen from nativity scenes all over the city, including the one at Daley Plaza, the volunteer crew responsible for installing the crèche took no chances. This year Jesus is secured to the manger with a thick black cable around his waist, which is bolted to the manger floor and covered with hay. “There’s no way you’d ever be able to get him out,” the chair of the committee said. Another volunteer suggested installing an electric shock device in the manger—which might have been the best idea of all, when you think about it for a minute.

Yet in the middle of it all, Christmas comes and Christ is born in our hearts again. A high school social worker at New Trier called this week with a story she knew I would like. At a special holiday assembly, “The High Five Choir” performed. It’s a group that brings together students from the special needs program and the regular choir. The choir performed popular holiday music and the student audience loved it. At the end, when the program was over, and the vocalists sat down, a young man from the special needs group, a young man from Liberia whose refugee family had been adopted and settled by a North Shore church, a young man with cerebral palsy, stood up with great difficulty and announced that he wanted to sing another song that was not on the program. And in a clear, strong voice, he sang, unaccompanied

> Joy to the world, the Lord is (will) come
> Let earth receive her king
> Let every heart prepare him room,
> And heaven and nature sing.

In the midst of all the frenetic activity, the frenzied preparing, the exhaustion and stress, Christmas comes and Christ is born.

It is a simple story—and so very human.

> Octavian is the Roman emperor—Augustus Caesar.
> A man by the name of Quirinius is the governor.
> Herod is the local king; he takes his orders from Rome.

In a remote outpost of the empire, an area called Judea, a small town called Nazareth, a man and woman begin a long journey. She is almost nine months pregnant. They head south, toward Bethlehem, his hometown, to be counted in a census. It is a hard journey. He walks mostly. She rides on their donkey. They stop at the end of each day at a road house where they find food and a place to sleep. Some nights they sleep out under the stars. Finally they arrive in Bethlehem, a small village. The only inn is already full.

The innkeeper, seeing the woman's condition, offers the stable out back. They make themselves as comfortable as they can, warmed by the heat of the cattle and sheep and goats. That night, her labor begins. The baby comes. The man helps her as best he can. Together they wrap their infant son in the bands of clean cloth they have brought along for that purpose. Swaddling will hold him securely and keep him warm. She nurses her child.

They both hold him, look at him in that wonder a baby inspires in new parents. And when he sleeps and they, exhausted from their journey, from all this, finally become drowsy, they place him in the cows' feed trough, a manger.

The world stops to listen to the story because of the possibility that it contains truth: truth about God, truth about you and me, truth about who we are and who we are meant to be.

Scottish poet George MacDonald wrote,

> "They all were looking for a king
> To slay their foes and lift them high:
> Thou cam'st, a little baby thing
> That made a woman cry.

The story says that the very essence of God is not what we expect—power, majesty, awesomeness—but vulnerable love, love born among us in an infant. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son," the Bible says (John 3:16). "God is love . . . , and those who abide in love, abide in God and God abides in them."

That is what the story wants from us—that we should abide in love, that we should love one another, that we should love those no one else loves, that we should love life and this beautiful world, that we should love God.

The late William Sloane Coffin said that the philosopher Descartes was wrong when he proposed "Cogito ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am"). Nonsense, Coffin said. "Amo ergo sum" ("I love, therefore I am"). The greatest gift you can give anyone is to enable them to love, because to love is to live, to be fully alive.

Dr. Henry Betts, founder and former CEO of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago is a distinguished Chicagoan and a tireless advocate for people with disabilities. In a conversation recently he told me about a young man in the Rehab Institute some years ago, a teenager, a paraplegic who became terribly depressed, stopped communicating with anyone, was virtually speechless, wouldn't get out of bed, assumed a fetal position all day long, and went into what Dr. Betts called total withdrawal.

And then the staff put another patient in the room with him, a three-year-old boy who had been severely burned.

The teenager turned his back and ignored the little boy at first, then began to notice and watch him and listen to what nurses and doctors were saying. And a miracle happened: the teenager started to care about his little roommate. Before long he was pressing the call button, telling the nurses to bring pain medicine, nagging—maybe he needed some water, some more food, he wasn't eating enough; he started to tell the nurses and doctors what he observed and advised them as to treatment and therapy.

The teenager started to care, to have compassion, to love—and to live.

The world stops this evening and, when everything is quiet, listens to a story about God, about love, about life, about you and me and what it means to be alive; a story that invites us, each one, to open our hearts, to love, to live God's love, our love for one another.

The world stops this evening and in some way all of us—old ,young, believers, non-believers—all of us tonight

> come to Bethlehem to see
> him whose birth the angels sing;
> Come, adore, on bended knee
> Christ, the Lord, the newborn King.